

TRAINS, BATTLESHIPS, and SUBMARINES

The Silver Arrow

Lev Grossman (Little, Brown, 2020)

The Silver Arrow is a train – a magic steam train, filled with talking animals, and fitted out with everything from a library to a candy car – which Kate receives as a present for her 11th birthday from rich Uncle Herbert. Off she and her younger brother Tom go on a fantastical adventure which carries both a sobering environmental message and a hopeful call to action.

On the Horizon

Lois Lowry (HMH, 2020)

The inspiration for this illustrated book in verse was a home movie – of Lois as a child, playing with her grandmother on Waikiki beach in Hawaii. In the background – on the horizon – is the USS *Arizona*, heading toward its berth in Pearl Harbor. The book links the personal stories of sailors at Pearl Harbor and those of Japanese civilians in Hiroshima. A heartbreaking but ultimately hopeful depiction of the very human side of war.

Mary Underwater

Shannon Doleski (Amulet/Abrams, 2020)

Mary's abusive father is home from prison, and the strain of dealing with threat of violence at home and a crushed and apathetic mother while avoiding a concerned aunt and a worried social worker has taken its toll. Mary is even failing science, her favorite class. To save her grade, Mary plans to build a submarine and pilot it across Chesapeake Bay. She gets support from her unexpected sweetheart of a project partner, the class clown Kip Dwyer, help from ex-Navy submersible scientist Ford Wallace, and inspiration from Joan of Arc. A story of friendship, bravery, and persistence, plus an empowered girl and an exciting dose of physics.

IN THE WOODS

Echo Mountain

Lauren Wolk (Dutton, 2020)

Ellie's family has lost everything in the Great Depression – so they move to Echo Mountain in the woods of Maine to start a new life. There tragedy strikes when a falling tree puts Ellie's father into a coma – an accident for which Ellie is unfairly blamed. She does her best to jar her father awake, which only increases tension between her and her mother and older sister. Eventually she meets Cate – “the hag” – an elderly mountain woman with a gift for healing who is herself injured, and the elusive boy Larkin, who has a talent for carving wood. Ellie, with this new support, comes into her own. A beautifully written story of interconnectedness, both to the natural world and to each other.

Whispering Pines

Heidi Lang (Margaret K. McElderry, 2020)

Rae and her mother – recovering from the mysterious disappearance of Rae’s father from his government lab – have moved to Whispering Pines, CT, a strange and spooky town where chalk and garlic are forbidden at the public school, and children periodically disappear, only to reappear without eyes. Rae links up with Caden, who comes from a family of ghost-hunters, to investigate these occurrences – and they end up dealing with a suspicious green energy company, a fearsome alternative dimension, and any number of supernatural threats. (Fans of *Stranger Things* will love it.) It ends on a cliffhanger – but luckily the sequel (*Infestation*) will be out in September.

COMING TO AMERICA

Everything Sad is Untrue

Daniel Nayeri (Levine Querido, 2020)

This deservedly much-acclaimed book has been described as “a love letter to storytelling” – and 12-year-old Khosrou (called Daniel) is a master storyteller. Daniel, who is Iranian, now lives in Oklahoma, where he, his mother, and sister fled after being threatened by the secret police for practicing Christianity, while his father remained behind in Iran. As Daniel tells his classmates the story of his family’s journey, the tale is interlaced with Persian mythology and history, humor, tragedy, and occasionally – this is a 12-year-old boy – poop. An impressive epic based on the author’s own life.

Santiago’s Road Home

Alexandra Diaz (Simon & Schuster, 2020)

Santiago, a 12-year-old Mexican orphan, refuses to return to his abusive grandmother – instead he links up with kind-hearted Maria Dolores and her young daughter and heads across the desert with them to cross the border into the United States. It’s a harrowing and near-deadly journey at the end of which the three are picked up by American immigration officers and separated. Santiago ends up in a bleak youth immigration detention center where he struggles with uncaring guards, an implacable bureaucracy, and fears for his future. A timely book about a brave kid.

WHAT HAPPENS AT SCHOOL...

Glitch

Laura Martin (HarperCollins, 2020)

Glitch Academy is a school for those with a rare gene that allows them to time travel. There 12-year-old cadets Regan and Elliot are training to identify and intercept “Butterflies” – illegal time travelers attempting to change the course of history. The two are long-time enemies – until a letter arrives from future Regan, telling them that they must work together to prevent a time-travel disaster. Sci-fi, excitement, and snippets of actual history.

My Life as a Potato

Arianne Costner (Random House, 2020)

Ben Hardy, who loathes potatoes, has just moved to Idaho, potato central, where his new school’s mascot is Steve the Spud. After an unfortunate mishap, Ben is recruited to don the

Spud costume and impersonate a giant potato – which role he does his very best to hide from everyone, especially his cute crush, Jayla.

The Assignment

Liza Weimer (Delacorte, 2020)

Charismatic history teacher Mr. Bartley is seeking to bring the past alive by assigning students a project in which they research and argue in favor of the Nazi “Final Solution” as agreed upon at the infamous 1942 Wannsee Conference. Cade, whose grandparents were immigrants from Poland and who witnessed atrocities first-hand, and best friend Logan take a stand against the assignment – and soon emotions escalate. A good discussion book on several levels.

EMPOWERING GIRLS

Dress Coded

Carrie Firestone (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2020)

Molly is fed up with the school’s oppressive and unfairly administered dress code – so she produces a podcast on the harm created by dress-code shaming. As the podcast gains more followers and attention, it becomes increasingly clear that policing girls’ appearances has complex psychological, social, cultural, and economic implications. Not that that’s the only problem on Molly’s plate.

Go With the Flow

Lily Williams and Karen Schneemann (First Second, 2020)

In this great graphic novel (illustrated in shades of red), four friends tackle the shame and embarrassment the surrounds menstruation – in the teeth of the unhelpful school principal, who finds football far more important than supplying girls with period products. Activism, friendship, and a wonderful group of very different girls.

AN OPPRESSED CITY AND TRAGIC TEDDY BEARS

A Wish in the Dark

Christina Soontornvat (Candlewick, 2020)

In this Thai-based fantasy, all the lights in the city of Chattana are the work of the magical-power-obsessed Governor, who appeared after the Great Fire, promising peace and order. Young Pong, born in Namwon Prison, has always dreamed of walking under those magical lights – but once he escapes, he finds that the world of the city is as crushingly unfair as that of the prison. Marked as a fugitive by his prison tattoo, Pong is relentlessly pursued by Nok, the prison warden’s daughter – while at the same time a revolution is brewing, as more and more people come to see the injustice of the Governor’s rule.

They Threw Us Away

Daniel Kraus (Henry Holt and Co., 2020)

Buddy, a teddy bear, wakes up to find himself not on his shelf in the toy store but in a garbage dump, filled with threatening seagulls and crushing bulldozers. In company with other multicolored Furrington teddies – including a pink bear named Sugar with a slightly

squashed head – Buddy sets off to escape from the dump and find the children who will give them the hug that confers “forever sleep.” First of a trilogy.

TROUBLES

Tune It Out

Jamie Sumner (Atheneum, 2020)

Twelve-year-old Lou Montgomery lives in a truck with her mother – who exploits Lou, who has the voice of an angel, by forcing her to sing for pay in casinos, diners, and karaoke bars. This is torture for Lou who can’t abide loud noises, crowds, or human contact. Eventually taken away from her mother and placed in the custody of a wealthy aunt and uncle, Lou has to adjust to a private school and new friends and to learn to cope with her sensory processing disorder.

Tornado Brain

Cat Patrick (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2020)

Thirteen-year-old Frankie, unlike her twin Tess, is neurodivergent – that is, she can’t stand being touched. hearing loud noises, or having disruptions in her routine. Then Frankie’s estranged best friend Colette goes missing – and clues to what happened seem to be related to Tess, Frankie, and Colette’s traditional game of “dare and scare.” A mystery and coming-of-age story.

A Home for Goddesses and Dogs

Leslie Connor (Katherine Tegen Books, 2020)

After her mother’s death, Lydia is sent to a Connecticut farm to live with her Aunt Brat, her aunt’s wife Eileen, and Elloroy, the aunts’ elderly landlord. Soon after her arrival, they adopt Guffer, a problematic yellow rescue dog. Slowly they build a family as Lydia adjusts to a new school and other troubles, and eventually Lydia shares her goddesses – paper collages of strong women made by her and her mother to inspire hope.

A Game of Fox and Squirrels

Jenn Reese (Henry Holt, 2020)

Sam, 11, and her older sister Caitlin, victims of abuse, have been sent to live with their Aunt Vicky and her wife Hannah in Oregon. While Caitlin is happy in the new home, Sam wants to return to their parents. Then Vicky gives Sam a card game – the Game of Fox and Squirrels – which chillingly comes to life with the seductive fox Ashlander. As Ashlander’s rules become increasingly cruel, Sam realizes that she must find the courage to resist. A haunting example of how traumatic truths are sometimes better told through fiction.

MAGIC!

Ikenga

Nnedi Okorafor (Viking, 2020)

Set in Nigeria, Nnamdi’s father, the chief of police, has been murdered – almost certainly by the Chief of Chiefs, head of the local crime syndicate. Nnamdi has sworn to avenge his

father's death, which seems impossible - until he's given an Ikenga, a magical totem that gives him superpowers.